



How to Throw a Shuriken

by Serge Mol

excerpted from his book,
"Classical Weaponry of Japan"



BUJUTSU RYŪHA AND THEIR SECRET WEAPONS

The way a school presented itself to outsiders was known as its *omote*, that is, its “surface” or “exterior.” A bujutsu ryūha would be known as a weapon school when it focused on a particular weapon. A sword school, for example, concentrated mainly on kenjutsu or iaijutsu, a spear school on sōjutsu, an archery school on kyūjutsu, and jūjutsu ryūha emphasized the grappling arts. Some schools taught a number of martial arts and weapons and were known as sōgō ryūha.

Hidden more deeply in the structure of a ryūha was the *ura*, that is, its “interior” or “hidden art.” A school’s *urawaza* (hidden technique) was known only by the initiated. In this way a school might be known as a kenjutsu school but also teach a substantial number of jūjutsu techniques in secret. In this case the school’s *omotewaza* (literally, “surface technique”) is kenjutsu, while its *urawaza* is jūjutsu. It was vitally important for exponents of the classical ryūha to avoid showing their full potential, so that they could mislead possible opponents or challengers.

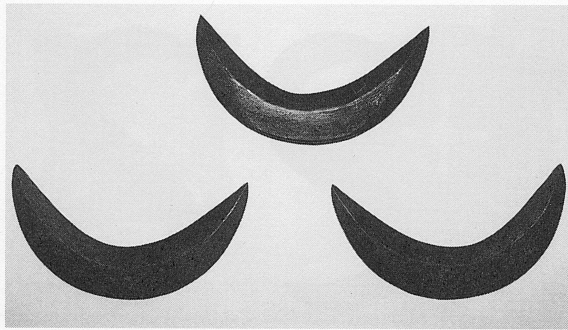


Figure 6-32. Shinkage Ryū's mikazukigata shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

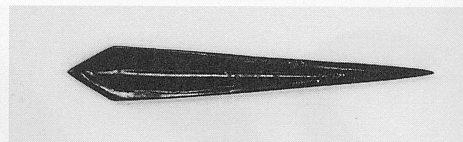


Figure 6-33. Tsutsumi Hōzan Ryū shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

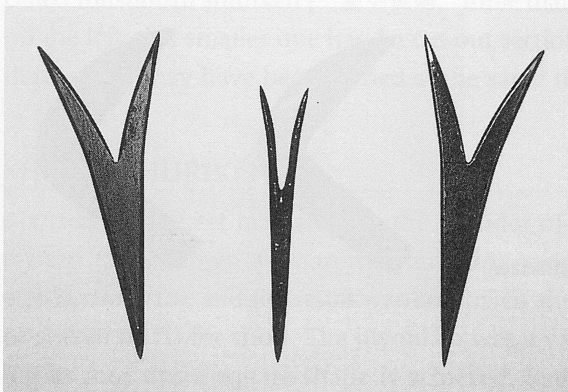


Figure 6-34. Matsubagata shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

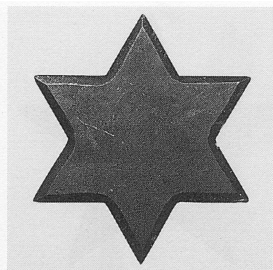


Figure 6-18. A roppōgata shuriken: this model was also known as kagome. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

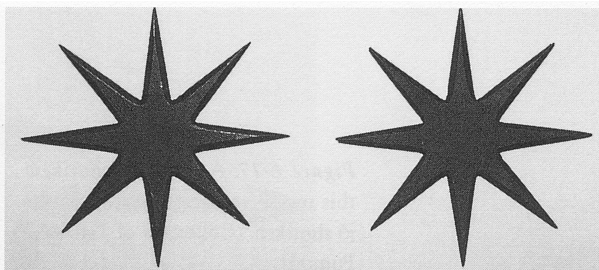


Figure 6-19. Kōga and Iga Ryū happōgata shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

TOKUGAWA YOSHINOBU AND HIS PASSION FOR SHURIKEN

Most people associate shuriken with ninja and assassination plots, but the preceding sections will have made it clear that this is a very narrow view. Shuriken were, in fact, secret weapons for defensive and offensive purposes and were widely used by members of the warrior class. Certain daimyō were known for their shuriken practice, and Tokugawa Yoshinobu (1837–1913), the 15th and last shōgun of the Edo period, had a particular interest in this weapon. He was not only a keen collector of shuriken but is reputed to have practiced with his shuriken every day without fail, developing his skill to the highest level. He is said to have been exceptionally good with the bōshuriken and able to use the weapon accurately at a range of five to six meters. Even after he had to abandon his role as shōgun, he continued his shuriken practice. He reportedly used various types of bōshuriken, including the kugigata shuriken and the harigata shuriken, as well as the shashuriken and some unusual variations of the jūji shuriken.

Yoshinobu's collection included a variety of shuriken, but in many cases it is uncertain to which ryūha they belonged. Some are likely to have been those of the Yagyū Shinkage Ryū, as that was the style of fencing studied by the shōgun's family.

Yoshinobu commissioned shuriken from various swordsmiths, and some names found on shuriken in his collection were Nagamichi from Aizu, Nobutaka, Takanobu, and Kunitomo from Owari. It is assumed that the shōgun was not alone in practicing shurikenjutsu, since some members of the three Tokugawa branch families (gosanke) practiced it as well and even presented Yoshinobu with several shuriken. As discussed in the section on harigata shuriken, members of the Mito Tokugawa family were already practicing shurikenjutsu in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

As mentioned, Yoshinobu's collection included two special types of jūji shuriken. Their original names have been lost, but one is now called oritatami karakuri jūji shuriken ("foldable cross-shaped shuriken") and the other kumitateshiki jūji shuriken ("assembled cross-

shaped shuriken"). When closed, both resemble a ryōbarigata shuriken (double-pointed bōshuriken), and they could probably be used as such. On closer examination, one sees that the first ryōbarigata shuriken is comprised of two longitudinal halves joined with a rivet. The halves can open out like scissors, and a spring mechanism locks them in a cross shape, effectively creating a jūji shuriken. To close them again the spring has to be pushed down. This is the secret of the foldable cross-shaped shuriken. The shuriken can be changed at will from a ryōbarigata shuriken to a jūji shuriken. The second one is similar and is also a ryōbarigata shuriken with two halves but without a rivet to keep them together or to allow the shuriken to open, and it has no spring mechanism. Instead, there is a kind of stopper (tomegane) with a square cross section. This is fixed to one of the halves. The other half has a square hole in the middle into which the stopper is inserted to keep both components together. On tapping the shuriken, the halves separate. If one half is turned ninety degrees and the halves are fixed, the result is a jūji shuriken. These shuriken are most unusual weapons for their period.

SHURIKENJUTSU

Shurikenjutsu, the combative art focusing on the use of the shuriken, was once considered the warrior's uragei, or "hidden art." Openly a warrior used weapons such as the sword, the spear, and the glaive, all considered "noble" weapons, but if circumstances required he could resort to less-orthodox weapons and tactics.

First of all, it is important to note that in shurikenjutsu exponents do not "throw" their shuriken but "strike" with them, since they feel the word "strike" (utsu) more suitably describes their methods of attack. Shurikenjutsu is a martial art, and shuriken were used with technical skill and also with a certain mental attitude and feeling. In shurikenjutsu, the kihaku—the mental attitude that generates strong mental powers and allows one to face anything or anyone without fear, and can subjectively be seen as mental domination over an opponent, or even "fighting spirit"—is related to that of kenjutsu. Another important element is kiai, which Western martial artists often associate with the shout that accompanies certain offensive and defensive actions, only very weak imitations of which are used in most modern martial arts forms. In fact, the shout or yell is just one audible manifestation of kiai, which is better described as an "internal power" generated by concentration, determination, or willpower, allowing one to take strong action. In martial arts one could call this "fighting spirit," which is essential in shurikenjutsu. For this reason, shuriken exponents do not use the word "throw" (nageru) to describe their techniques, as this action is perceived as too casual and lacking in spirit.

The methods of "striking" with the shuriken, called uchihō or dahō, depended on the distance from the target and the range of the weapon. The maximum range depended on the shuriken's size and weight, as well as its type. Based on the types of shuriken, one may distinguish two principal categories of striking methods: those with straight shuriken, and those with star, cross, or disc shuriken. Special shuriken would use a variation of one of these categories.

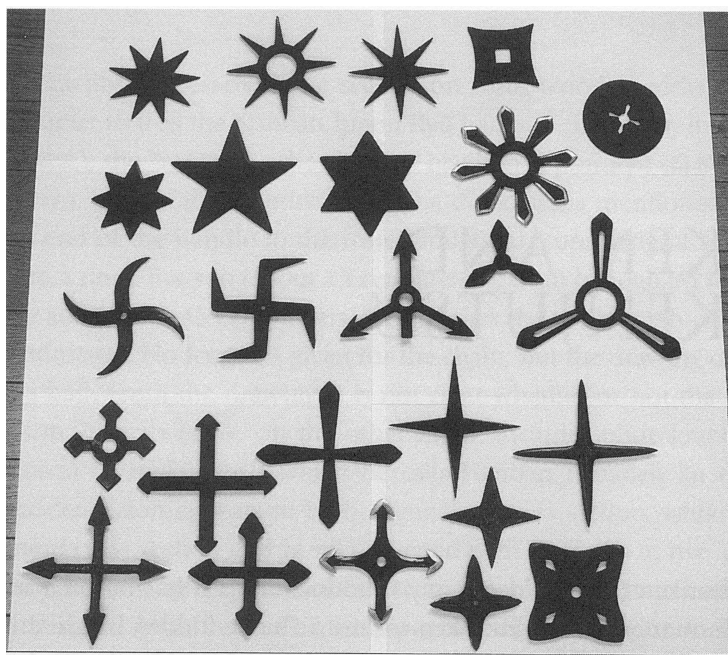


Figure 6-1. A selection of shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

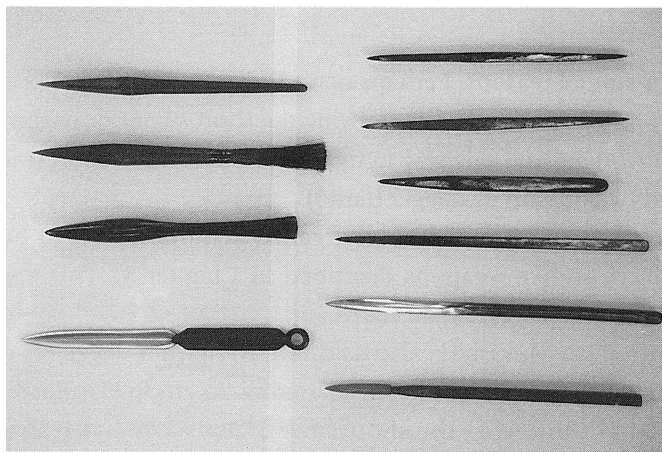


Figure 6-4. Examples of bōshuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

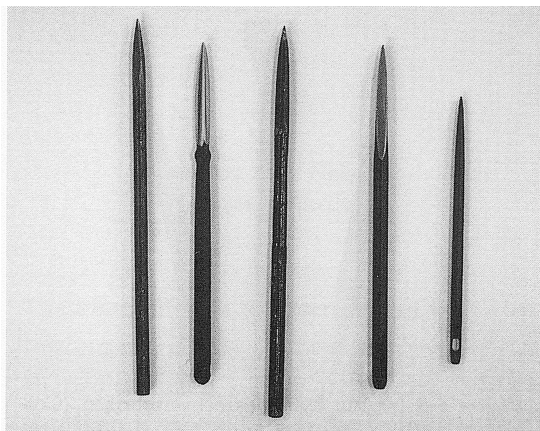


Figure 6-5. A selection of harigata shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

Two methods of striking with the straight shuriken were chokudahō (also called sugu uchi or jikidahō) or ikkaitendahō while those with the star, cross, and disc shuriken usually used takaiten dahō. Regardless of the method of striking, it is important to use not just the movement of the arm but to coordinate one's posture (kamae), body movement (taisabaki), footwork (ashisabaki), hand movement (tesabaki), and breathing (kokyū), all the while keeping an unmovable mind (fudōshin).

When practicing chokudahō, or "straight striking method," the shuriken exponent holds the bōshuriken in the palm of one hand, for example, his right. The tip of the shuriken points outwards, that is, towards the target, and the shuriken rests on the middle finger, with the index and ring fingers gently touching the shuriken's side (Figure 6-37). The tip

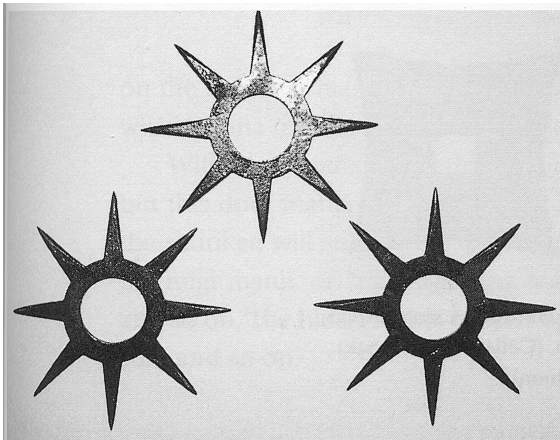


Figure 6-20. Kobori Ryū happōgata shuriken.
(Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

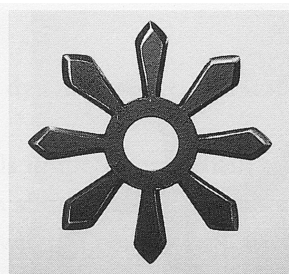


Figure 6-21. A Kobori Ryū hōringata happō shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

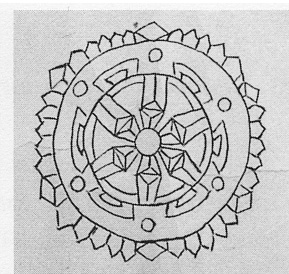


Figure 6-22. An illustration of a hōrin from the *Yagyū Ryū Hichūden* scroll. (Author's collection)

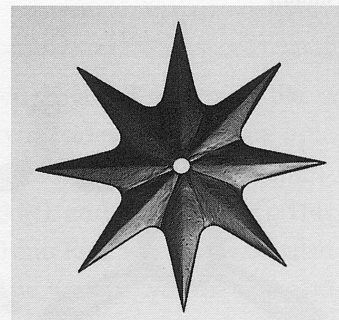


Figure 6-23. Kodan Ryū happō shuriken.
(Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

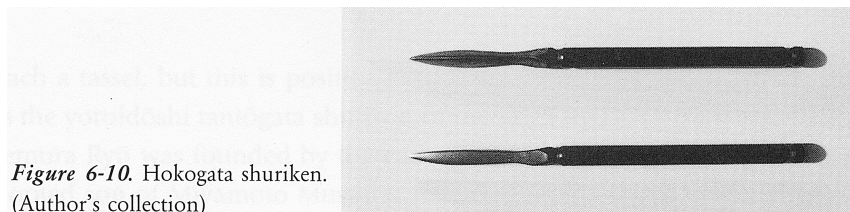


Figure 6-10. Hokogata shuriken.
(Author's collection)

of the thumb presses lightly on the end of the shuriken, which should be held as gently as if one were holding an egg. Several shuriken may be held in the left hand in preparation for the next strike. With chokudahō, there are two ways of releasing the shuriken, each with a slightly different flight pattern: the first is to release it without a snap of the wrist, which will make the shuriken fly as in the representation in Figure 6-38; the second is to snap the wrist when releasing it, which will make the shuriken turn slightly in the air and behave as in Figure 6-39. The first method is used when the target is 2–3 meters away, and the second is better when the target is 3–7 meters away but is most efficient between 3–5 meters. A strike with a shuriken can be made using an arm movement starting from above the head, called hon uchi. One that starts from the front of the chest and ends at the side of the body is called yoko uchi, and from down up, gyaku uchi.

When striking with ikkaitendahō, the shuriken is held with the same gentleness as for chokudahō, but this time the tip is in the inside of the palm, and the blunt end points towards the target (Figure 6-40). After being released, the shuriken will turn around in the air and point towards the target (Figure 6-41). A lot of practice is required to feel how far the blunt end of the shuriken should extend beyond the fingertip, and how much pressure is needed for what distance. This method is more suited for distances from 10 meters to a little over 12 meters, but only with bōshuriken that are heavy enough to be stable in flight.

The flight patterns of star, cross, or disc shuriken are different than those of bōshuriken, as the former will spin several times before hitting the target. In fact, the name of the striking method, takaitenhō, means “multiple spinning method.” Unlike bōshuriken, which have only one or two points, star or cross shuriken have more, so the percentage of hits on target is higher. The most effective way of striking with this kind of shuriken was the hon uchi method. Of course, in emergencies, yoko uchi or gyaku uchi could also be used, but accuracy was more difficult. One hand usually held a stack of shuriken, and the other was used to strike.

In addition to the basic methods of striking, shuriken practitioners had to master striking from various positions, for example, while standing, running, after falling or rolling, and so on, and in all directions.

Unless one was only using a single shuriken and followed it up with an iaijutsu, kenjutsu, or jūjutsu action, it was important to be able to strike in haya uchi fashion, that is, in rapid succession. In the olden days, when shuriken masters were much faster than their modern counterparts, it was reportedly possible to make accurate strikes with twelve successive shuriken within ten seconds. Speed and timing were essential when fighting with shuriken. All schools had their own ideas about this. One concept held that shuriken striking had to be a “battle of in (ying) and yō (yang)” (inyō arasoi or inyō tatakai).⁴ In the continuous cycle of inyō, “in” is followed by “yō,” which is followed by “in,” and so on. In shurikenjutsu, according to this concept, ying (in) represents the inactive, “no movement”—the shuriken is still in the hand and not in flight, or it is lodged in the target. Yang (yō) represents movement—the shuriken is speeding towards the target. The very moment the shuriken hits the target, yang (yō) is succeeded by ying (in) again. Just before the shuriken hits the target, in the interval of change from yang (yō) to ying (in), one has to strike with

another shuriken, that is, another shuriken has to be in the yang (yō) phase. In shurikenjutsu, one cannot wait until the first shuriken has hit the target before striking with the second one, as this means there will be an interval in which an opponent can attack you. At the highest level of shurikenjutsu, this means that a strike is made with the second shuriken faster than the first, the third faster than the second, and so on. The speed always increases, and the time taken to transfer a shuriken from one hand to the other becomes shorter. It is very difficult for an opponent to counter this rhythm. An opponent unfamiliar with the rhythm will think he has a chance to counter before a new shuriken is launched but finds that when he wants to take action, another shuriken is already speeding towards him. When using only a single shuriken, one has to take the next action before the shuriken hits the target and is in the ying (in) phase.

Naturally, the various ryūha that taught shurikenjutsu had individual styles and concepts. As mentioned, some schools were not intent on killing an opponent but just wanted to prevent him from taking further aggressive action by attacking his eyes.

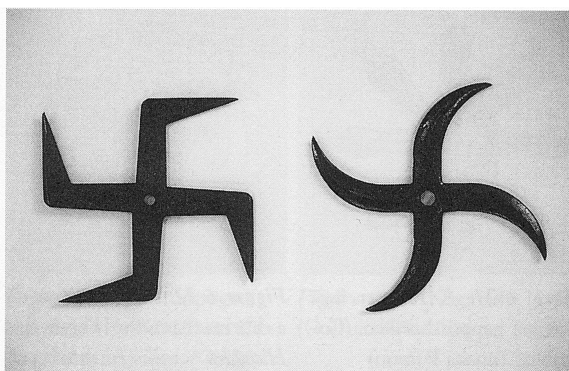


Figure 6-24. Two manjigata shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

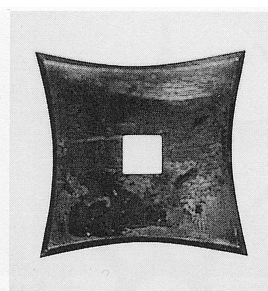


Figure 6-25. A senban shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

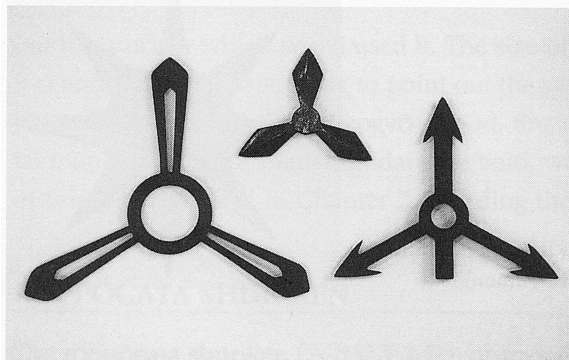


Figure 6-26. Three sankō shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

Shurikenjutsu was often taught in iaijutsu, kenjutsu, and jūjutsu ryūha, and was combined with their techniques. In iaijutsu, a shuriken strike could be used as a prelude to a sudden sword draw attack, to distract an opponent and create a unguarded moment (*sukima*). In kenjutsu and jūjutsu, a shuriken was also used to distract an opponent just before moving into his reach, after which he could be cut down, hit with *atemi*, or thrown down.

In *Bugei Ryūha Daijiten*, although Watatani and Yamada list a number of shurikenjutsu schools, these ostensibly seem to have taught only shurikenjutsu.⁵ However, it is unlikely that such schools could have survived long. Iwai Kohaku believes that in the Edo period no schools focused exclusively on shurikenjutsu.⁶ Two schools famous for shurikenjutsu are the Shirai Ryū and the Negishi Ryū, which were originally sōgō bujutsu ryūha, where the main art was kenjutsu. It was only after the Meiji period that their main art became shurikenjutsu.

In most bujutsu ryūha, the shuriken was considered a secret weapon and shurikenjutsu was taught as a hidden art. On the surface (*omote*), the school taught kenjutsu, iaijutsu, or jūjutsu. Among schools that ostensibly taught kenjutsu but secretly included shurikenjutsu are the Shinkage Ryū, the Taisha Ryū, and the Enmei Ryū, to mention a few. Among jūjutsu schools, the Sekiguchi Ryū, the Tsutsumi Hōzan Ryū, the Sho Shō Ryū, and the Kiraku Ryū included shurikenjutsu. In jūjutsu, shuriken were also used as *tenouchi*, that is, small hand-held weapons to deliver *atemi* (body strikes). The sharp tips could be used to attack nerve points at close range, just as with, for example, the *dokko* and the *tenketsubari*. Some schools that gave instruction in shuriken recommended keeping one shuriken as a spare to be used for grappling at close quarters. Figure 6-42 shows some methods of holding a bōshuriken when using it as a *gekitotsubuki* (hit-and-thrust weapon). Figure 6-43 illustrates how shashuriken can be held for *atemi*.

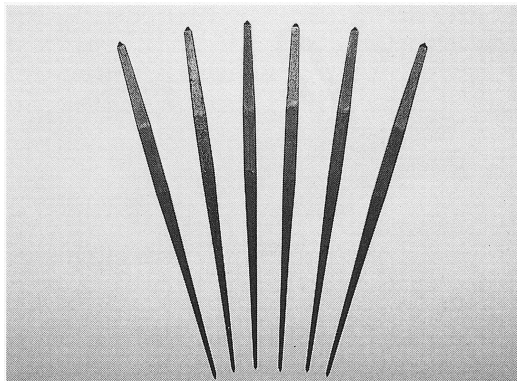


Figure 6-7. Kukishin Ryū's uchibari. (Author's collection)

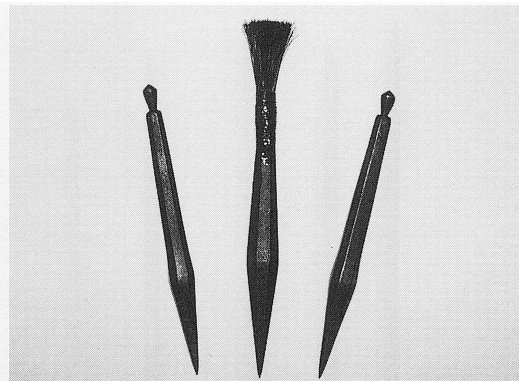


Figure 6-8. Negishi Ryū's distinctive shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

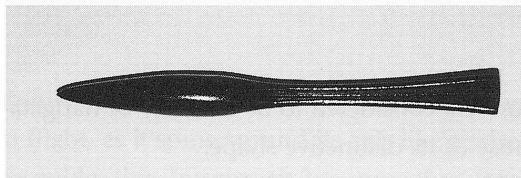
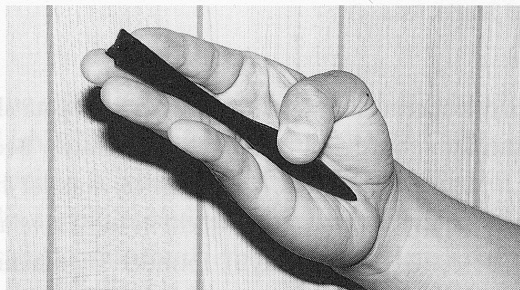


Figure 6-9. Two views of Yagyū Ryū's jūji bōshuriken.



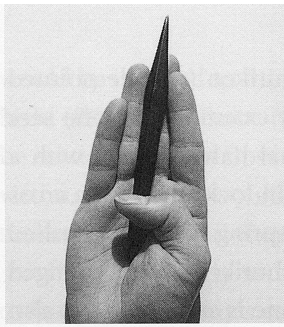


Figure 6-37. A shuriken as held when using the chokudahō method.

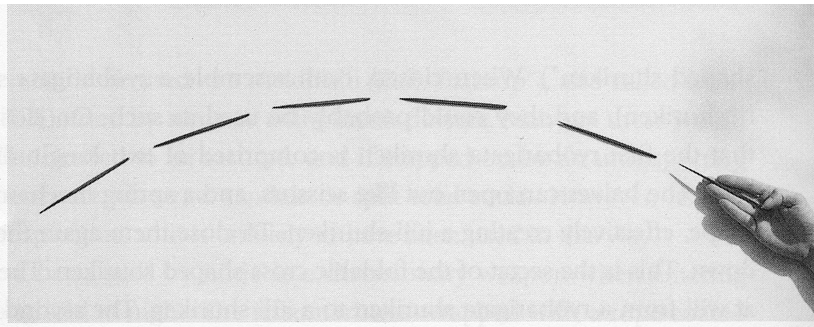


Figure 6-38. A representation of the flight pattern of a shuriken launched with the chokudahō method and without a wrist snap.

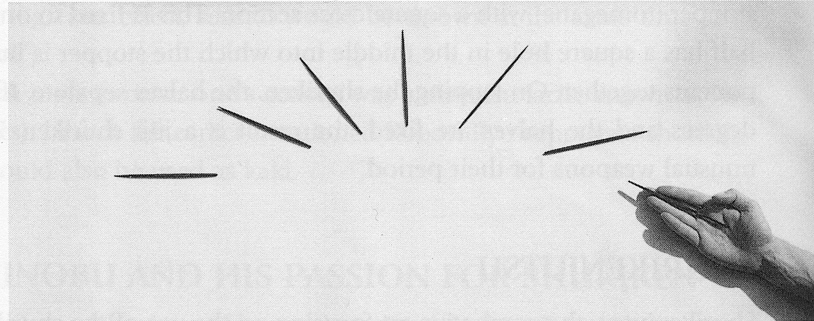


Figure 6-39. A representation of the flight pattern of a shuriken launched with the chokudahō method and with a wrist snap.

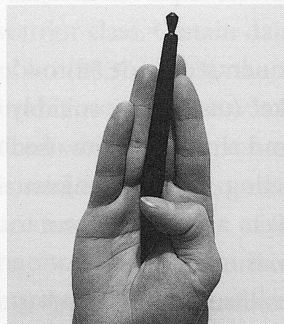


Figure 6-40. A shuriken as held when using the ikkaiten-hō method.

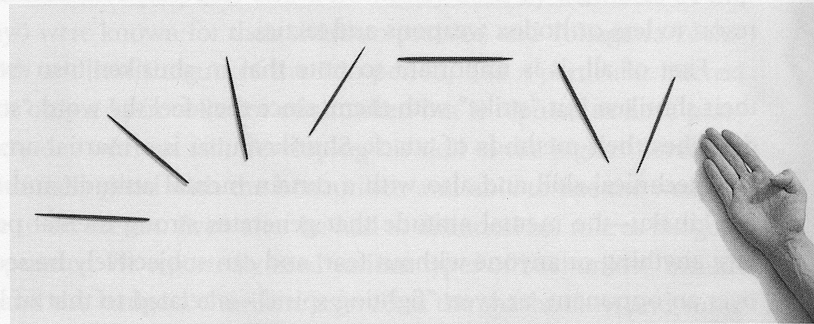


Figure 6-41. A representation of the flight pattern with the ikkaiten-hō method.

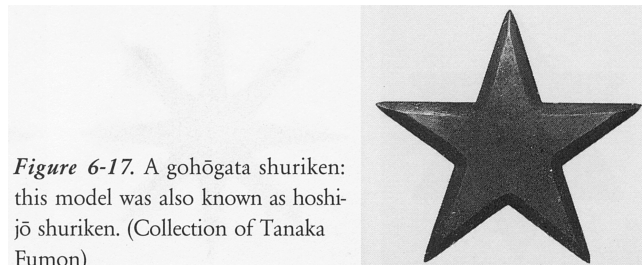


Figure 6-17. A gohōgata shuriken: this model was also known as hoshijō shuriken. (Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

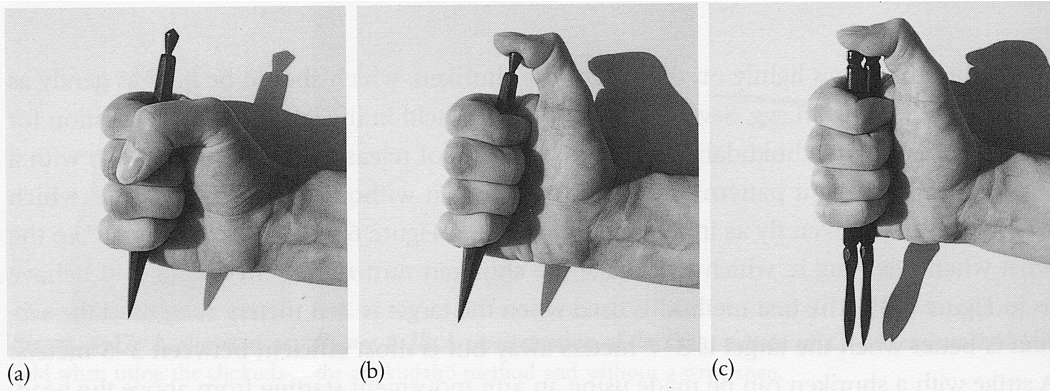


Figure 6-42. Methods of holding bōshuriken when using them as hit-and-thrust weapons: holding one shuriken (a); holding one shuriken and pressing on the top (b), a method that gives more powerful atemi although one has to take care not to injure one's own thumb; using two shuriken (c). These methods are more suited for hitting downwards.

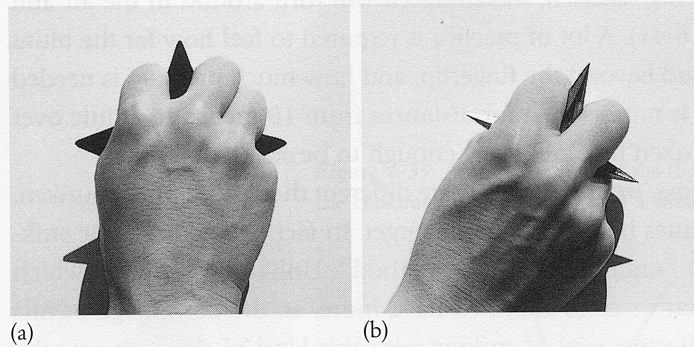


Figure 6-43. Methods of hitting with shashuriken: with a senbanshuriken (a); with a jūji shuriken (b). When using these methods, care had to be taken not to injure oneself, as the force of resistance might push the back point of the shuriken into one's own hand, especially with the type shown in (b).

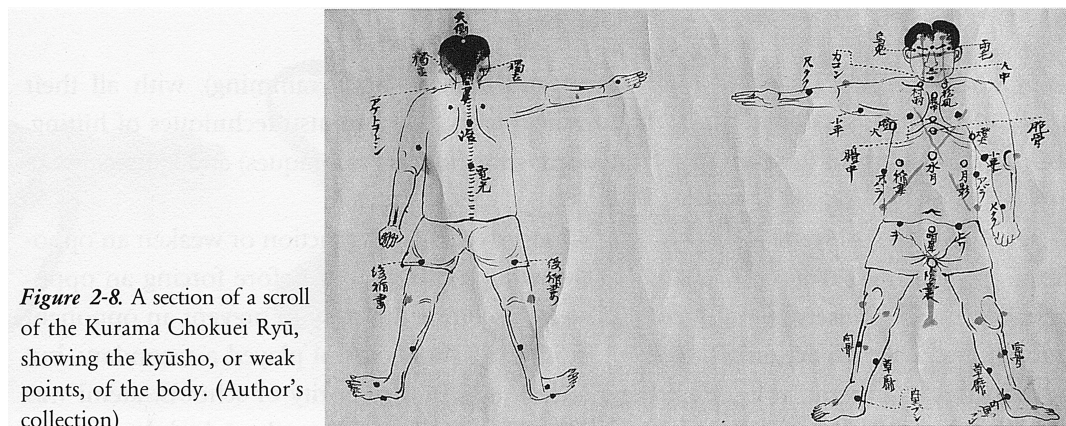


Figure 2-8. A section of a scroll of the Kurama Chokuei Ryū, showing the kyūsho, or weak points, of the body. (Author's collection)

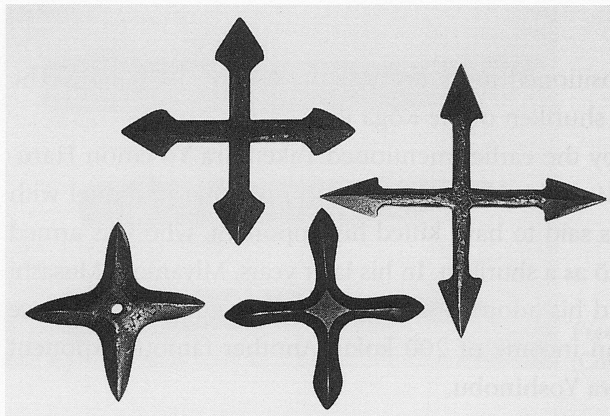


Figure 6-12. An assortment of jūji shuriken.
(Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

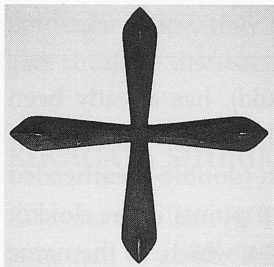


Figure 6-13. The Shinkage Ryū's jūyonken.
(Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

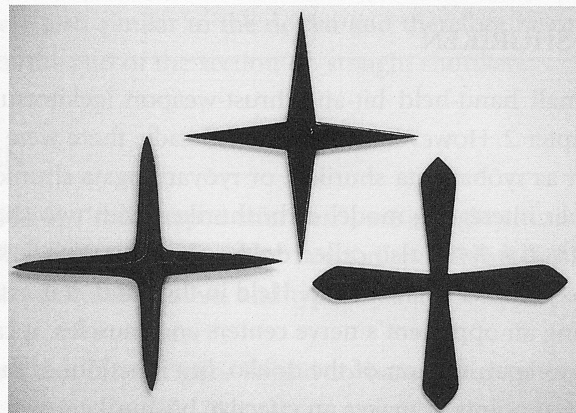
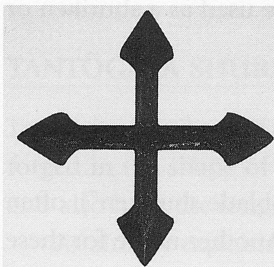
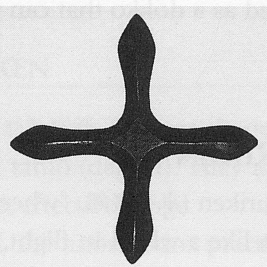


Figure 6-14. Some jūji shuriken.
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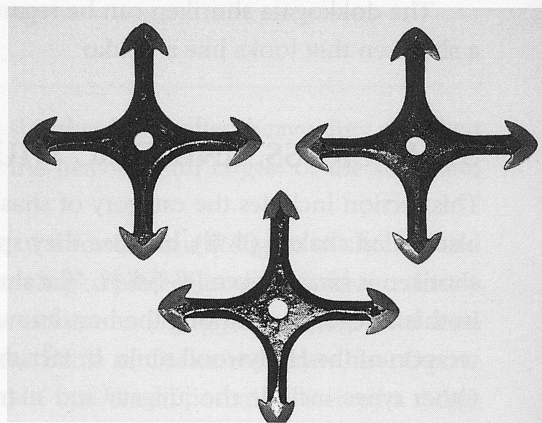


(a)

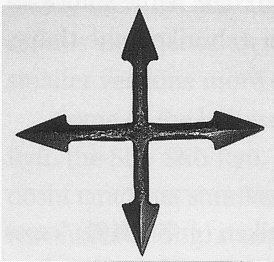


(b)

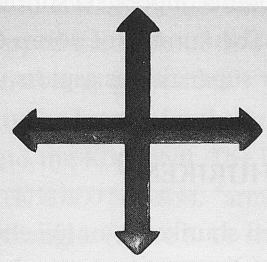
Figure 6-15. Yagyū Shinkage Ryū shuriken.
(Collection of Tanaka Fumon)



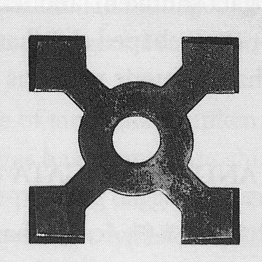
(c)



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 6-16. Other examples of jūji shuriken.
(Collection of Tanaka Fumon)

